



Wireless broadband gets a boost 12

Mobile phones to give away free music 13



No compensation for data loss fiasco 14

End of the road for Evesham warranties

Evesham warranty holders look certain to be left in the lurch after the latest twist in a long saga of financial shenanigans has left the UK brand up for sale yet again.

Following weeks of speculation over whether the Midlands-based manufacturer was heading for administration – and what that meant for consumers – the company's owners finally broke their media silence and admitted that Evesham was winding down operations and looking for a buyer.

The company ran into trouble last year but was 'saved' when Time co-founder and former Tiny owner Tahir Mohsan salvaged the operation with a £10 million capital injection. Evesham continued trading under the name Geemore Technology, which is owned by Mohsan's PCC Technology Ltd.

When the original Evesham went belly-up, customers hoped that warranties would be honoured, but they will now be disappointed. "It was no longer possible for Evesham to provide free support to its customers," Mohsan claimed in a statement. "However, PCC was conscious not to leave customers out on a limb without any support, so has negotiated reduced rates with Total Care so that customers can take up support should they desire."

Total Care has been proactive in calling Evesham customers on the telephone, telling them that their

computers were no longer covered and offering to sell them new cover.

Total Care is based in the Time Technology Park in Burnley, the UK base of Mohsan, the TimeUK owner who invested in Geemore Technology, the company that has taken over the Evesham brand. It now appears that Evesham's new owners are trying to charge customers for services that they have already paid for once to the old Evesham company.

Other customers have simply been left out in the cold. One forum member claims that her computer was broken while in for repair and sought compensation, only to be told she was talking to the wrong Evesham.

"With regards to your request for compensation, Evesham Technology Ltd entered Administration on 3rd August 2007. Warranties and repairs were then transferred to Geemore Technology who are currently trading as Evesham Technology (not Evesham Technology Ltd)," wrote Dale Allison of customer support. "However, since 3rd February 2008 all ex-gratia support for equipment from Evesham Technology Ltd has been withdrawn. This follows the company's liquidation on 3rd January 2008."

Confused? Perhaps you're meant to be. Evesham's assets have been sold to several different companies linked to Mohsan's empire in what staff and rivals have blasted as "asset stripping".

It is unclear what the future now holds for Evesham. "If a buyer cannot be found," said Mohsan, "Geemore intends to continue, but the operation may be reduced to a smaller operation with lower overheads."

Certainly the website has a closing-down sale atmosphere. However, when *Computer Shopper* phoned up posing as a customer, we were told that although Evesham "had been liquidated", the company was now trading under a different name and so "you won't have any problems with warranties in the future".

For the latest developments, please visit our website at www.computershopper.co.uk.



Confusion surrounds the Evesham name

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Evesham: the phoenix from the flames

According to the Better Payments Practice Campaign, a phoenix company occurs when the assets of one limited company are moved to another legal entity. Often some or all of the directors remain and, in some cases, the new company has the same or a similar name to the failed business. The phoenix company will operate in the same sphere as its predecessor.

It is perfectly legal to form a new company from the remnants of a failed company. A director of a failed company can become a director of a new company unless there are exceptional circumstances,

creating a situation that is ripe for confusion for both customers and creditors.

For example, Geemore Technology, the new owner of Evesham Technologies Limited, was formerly called Evesham Micros, according to Companies House. Companies House records also show that Total Care And Support Limited used to be called Granville Care And Support. Granville was the name of Time Computers' parent company, which collapsed with huge debts in 2005 and was the subject of an investigation by the Department of Trade and Industry.



HD DVD is dead

Toshiba has ditched its HD DVD format for high-definition video. The company told *Computer Shopper* that it will concentrate on standalone DVD players and has no plans to produce devices using Sony's competing Blu-ray Disc technology. Olivier Van Wynendaele, Toshiba's deputy general manager for DVD, also claimed that there were no plans to introduce Blu-ray drives into Toshiba's PC products. Many compared the battle between HD DVD and Blu-ray to the struggle between VHS and Betamax in the 1980s.

Both formats offer alternative ways to view high-definition video, and both provide significantly more storage capacity than a DVD. They use a violet-coloured laser running at a wavelength of 405nm, although Blu-ray uses a tighter track layout. This means that it can store more data than HD DVD but also means that the two technologies are incompatible. Now that Toshiba has dropped HD DVD, consumers no longer face gambling and investing in the wrong technology. Blu-ray's success is not all good news for movie fans, though. Blu-ray discs cost more than HD DVDs to manufacture.

The death knell for HD DVD was an announcement in January by Warner Brothers, the last big movie studio that had remained undecided about which technology to use. When it voted in favour of Blu-ray, the news caused the HD DVD forum to cancel all its press events at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. Retailers then announced that they would not be stocking HD DVD products and, one month later, Toshiba withdrew completely from the battle.

Following Toshiba's announcement, and as we went to press, Microsoft decided to stop manufacturing and selling HD DVD players for its Xbox 360 games console, although it claims it will support existing warranties. The company's Gamescore website (<http://gamerscoreblog.com>) explained that the withdrawal from HD DVD was "as a result of recent decisions made by Toshiba, Hollywood studios and retailers," and that "we will continue to give consumers the choice to enjoy digital distribution of high-definition movies and TV shows directly to their living room, along with playback of the DVD movies they already own".



Manhunt 2: still unavailable in the UK, at least for the time being

Manhunt 2 fiasco

The on-again off-again saga over the controversial Manhunt 2 video game has taken another twist and sparked calls for a new, legally binding classification system for computer games in the UK.

The popular but gruesome game cannot be released in the UK because it has repeatedly been refused a rating by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC).

After it was initially refused shelf space in June 2007, the game's publisher Rockstar applied to the Video Appeals Committee (VAC), which voted in December that Manhunt 2 was "unlikely to cause harm to adults or children" and said it could go on sale.

With the situation unravelling into farce, the BBFC appealed against the appeal and took the issue to the High Court, where Mr Justice Mitting recently branded the game "dark and violent". He insisted that the VAC should overturn its classification, as its decision was based on "a clear error of law" in how it viewed the question of harm. So Manhunt 2 is banned again.

Now the government is planning a legally enforceable classification system similar to that used in cinema releases. The BBFC is expected to be given the job of deciding what is acceptable.

Under the proposals, to be fleshed out in the Byron review into potential harm to children from games and the internet due out this month (March), it would be illegal for shops to sell classified games to a child below the recommended age.

At present only games containing sex or grossly violent content need an age limit, and most ratings are voluntary.

Solid leap forward for storage

Those in the market for a new laptop can expect a performance boost of around 60 per cent over previous models where disk speeds are concerned. New laptops carrying a new type of solid-state flash memory will arrive within weeks.

Samsung has begun production of 64GB solid-state drives (SSDs) with its new SATA II interface, and the company claims that the drives are far faster than the current SSDs already available in laptops from Apple, Lenovo and Toshiba, among others. It also claims that the drive is two to five times faster than conventional hard disk drives.

The SSD SATA II drives can read data at 100MB/s and write at 80MB/s, consume nearly 75 per cent less power than a typical hard disk and are considerably lighter. SSDs are also more robust and offer faster start-up times than conventional hard disks.

"While there will always be a market for hard disk drives, we see growing demand for our new SSDs, especially now that they are available with the SATA II

interface," said Jim Elliott, director of flash marketing, Samsung Semiconductor.

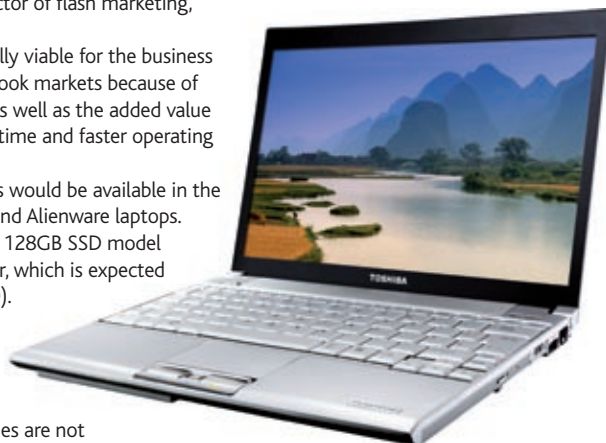
"SSD technology is especially viable for the business and high-end consumer notebook markets because of its outstanding performance, as well as the added value gained from virtually no downtime and faster operating speeds," he continued.

Elliott said the SATA II drives would be available in the next few weeks in select Dell and Alienware laptops.

Samsung plans to launch a 128GB SSD model towards the middle of this year, which is expected to cost around \$2,000 (£1,020).

Apple currently charges £640 to replace an 80GB hard disk with a 64GB SSD in a new MacBook Air laptop.

So far SSD storage capacities are not overwhelming, but BitMicro's 832GB drive, which is scheduled for the second half of this year, will provide a serious amount of disk space.



▲ Toshiba's Portege R500-S5003 is one of a new generation of laptops with solid-state drives

Airwaves boost for wireless broadband

Mobile and rural web users could receive a shot in the arm thanks to plans announced by the telecoms regulator Ofcom allowing government departments to sell parts of the radio spectrum.

Britain's airwaves are a crowded space carrying information ranging from WiFi and WiMAX networks to mobile phone voice and data signals, FM radio channels, police radio and Freeview TV. Lack of space has been one reason why innovative services such as WiMAX and certain mobile television channels have failed to get off the ground. Every time a new slice of the radio spectrum becomes available, there is intense lobbying and debate about how it should be used.

The new proposals would allow public bodies such as the Ministry of Defence, which currently controls 75 per cent of the airwaves, to sell off or lease its capacity to the highest bidder. The value of the spectrum up for sale could be as high as £20 billion, according to an independent study dating back to 2005.

"Public bodies, and the MoD in particular, hold some of the most valuable and sought-after radio spectrum," said Ofcom chief executive Ed Richards. "By working with these organisations, we are enabling them to trade and release this spectrum and create new opportunities for the development of wireless services for the whole country."

According to Motorola, one of the companies that is lining up to offer new wireless services and hardware, there are several key spectrum segments that interest data providers.

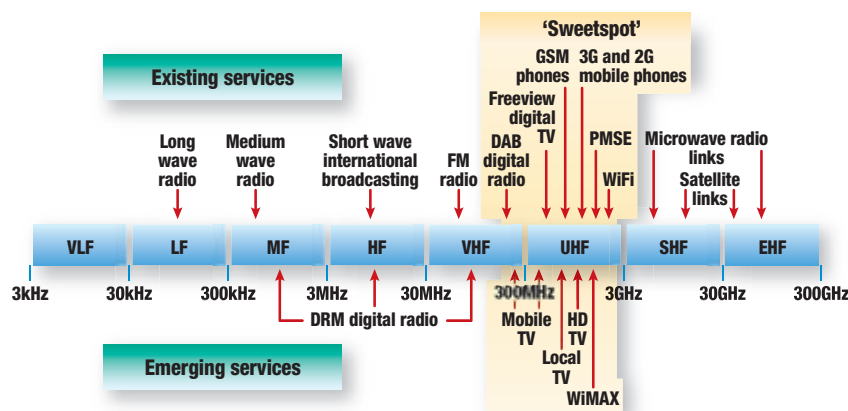
Specifically, the possibility of fast, wireless internet connections is causing excitement.

"These bands are prime candidates for Broadband Wireless Access systems on a technology-neutral basis," a spokesperson said. "These are expected to play a very important role in the deployment of high data rate access connectivity and will be a significant factor in the deployment of Next Generation Access services."

Not everyone is happy with the sell-off, however, and some are complaining that the emergency services need access to the airwaves. Ofcom claimed critical airspace would remain reserved. "It is essential that the MoD retains access to the spectrum it needs for equipment test and development, training and exercising, force preparation and peacetime operational requirements within the UK," Richards said.

THE CROWDED AIRWAVES

Commercial services are packed into a narrow area of available frequencies. New rules could open up more frequencies for exploitation



WiMAX technology finally gaining ground

An alliance between Intel Capital and ISP Freedom4 is good news for those who want to use wireless internet services. Intel Capital is promising a "substantial investment" in WiMAX technology, which could soon bring wireless broadband to many areas of Britain.

WiMAX is a long-range wireless broadband access technology that has so far delivered little. Following trials of residential and business services, Freedom4 has attracted interest from Intel and will roll out services to towns and cities "where it is economically viable" within months.

Freedom4 has been able to deliver WiMAX to the UK before anyone else because its parent company Pipex holds a licence to the portion of airwaves that carries certain WiMAX signals.

"We provide services in areas where traditional ADSL broadband access is not feasible, giving residents and businesses a cost-effective alternative to access the latest in internet connectivity," said Mike Read, CEO of Freedom4.

The company has launched limited residential services in Milton Keynes, offering 1Mbit/s upload and download speeds to subscribers. That

download rate compares poorly with technologies such as ADSL and cable, but is better than speeds available in many areas where telephone lines are too long to carry high-bandwidth ADSL.

Freedom4 says it offers better upstream speeds than other ISPs, so the service is ideal for consumers who sometimes work from home and need to send large files, or who want to upload large images for storage or printing.

Manchester and Warwick are next on Freedom4's list, with other areas all around the UK pencilled in for the coming months.

Timeline 100+ years of wireless data

Morse matters

In 1895, a long time before modems and SMS, Guglielmo Marconi moved his labs experiments on radio outside and sent signals using Morse code over the airwaves. Tweaking frequencies and building ridiculously large antennas helped him send binary signals across the Atlantic within 10 years.



GSM

GSM mobile phone technology sent its first SMS message and, within two years, Vodafone launched the first data/fax service, a triumph for executives on the move – even if 5.6Kbit/s was a pootling rate. The technology has gone through major changes, but remains the prime mobile platform. Future speeds could reach 100Mbit/s.



Smells like WiFi

The wireless network started life in AlohaNet research labs in Hawaii in 1970, but the 802.11 standard sparked the technology's emergence with (theoretical) sluggish speeds of 1-2Mbit/s at 2.4GHz. This improved to 11Mbit/s with 802.11b and to 54Mbit/s with 802.11g. The goal for the next-generation 802.11n is 500Mbit/s.



Bluetooth bites

Famously named after King Harald Bluetooth of Denmark, this short-range personal area network started life with a meagre 1Mbit/s transfer rate and a slew of incompatibility issues that meant phones, PDAs and printers that were supposed to talk to one another didn't. Many bugs were ironed out, and version 2.0 runs more reliably and at 3Mbit/s.



WiMAX in the wings

Offering high bandwidth and long range, WiMAX has suffered many false dawns due to spectrum limitations and problems penetrating buildings. Two types exist: 802.16-2004 (802.16d) is fixed wireless, which cannot handle network handovers, while mobile WiMAX, (802.16e-2005) can be used to connect while roaming.



1895

1992

1997

1999

2001



Free “CD-quality” music on phone contract

Music industry executives are apparently so desperate to earn money for their heavily pirated wares they are willing to give them away – if you buy into a contract with the right mobile phone company. That’s the message from a new subscription service called MusicStation Max, which is promising unlimited downloads at near-CD quality direct to mobile phones, with higher-quality versions of the same tracks sent direct to the owner’s PC.

“The download is a well-compressed eaac+ file for mobile phones. It is about eight times smaller than an MP3 file, but still near-CD quality,” said Tim Hadley, PR director for Omnifone, the company behind MusicStation. “As this is downloaded, another file is sent to your PC.”

The company has yet to disclose what quality or bit rate the PC files will be. However, it is touting a server-based backup system to protect music from data disaster. “Unlike traditional music phones, consumers will have their entire MusicStation Max experience, including their playlists and recommendations, backed up on the data network in case their device is lost, broken or stolen,” said Rob Lewis, CEO of Omnifone. “Users will never lose their music experience again.”

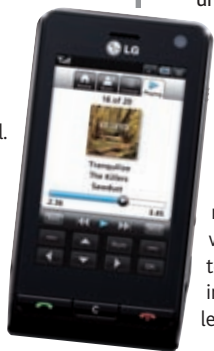
Unlike most subscription services, Omnifone claims the tracks’ DRM will not kill the songs once a consumer’s subscription has expired, and that songs will have an unlimited lifetime and play count. A similar service for computers offered by Napster disables tracks once subscribers stop paying for the service.

The first MusicStation Max handset will be made by LG and is compatible with 3G/HSDPA services. Although the company says the service is free, there will clearly be a premium to pay on the 12- or 18-month phone contracts. Pricing details have yet to be confirmed.

The move follows last month’s disastrous non-launch of the proposed advertising-based P2P download service from QTrax. It announced access to 25 million tracks from the major music publishers, only for the four major labels to deny knowledge of such a deal.

Analysts say the idea is still alive and provides another way for executives to come to terms with selling music in a world where consumers habitually swap files. “The music industry is keen to monetise its products in

► Subscription services promise free music



DRM explained

Digital Rights Management (DRM) is a range of control technologies designed to protect copyright holders’ interests in a digital world where making perfect copies of content is easy.

DRM is unpopular with consumers, who find it restricts them from using digital media however they choose. One example is the Content Scrambling System, used to ensure that DVDs could be played only on DVD players equipped to process the encrypted material. Its aim was to control copying and restrict it to the established DVD industry. Like many DRM systems, it was soon cracked.

The internet and file-sharing networks caused companies to double their efforts to impose DRM. Most online stores that sell music employ some sort of rights management. Apple uses its FairPlay system to restrict music bought from its iStore so it plays only on iPod devices. Subscription-based services such as Napster’s stream unlimited music encoded with Windows Media Audio (WMA). These work while the consumer continues to pay, but are rendered unplayable once the subscription expires.

The DRM can be changed to suit the industry. For example, Napster won’t let users download any music to an MP3 player unless subscribers cough up an additional fee.

Microsoft recently released its latest DRM system. PlayReady supports multiple formats and can be applied to music, games, films and ringtones. It will work with hardware ranging from set-top boxes to mobile phones.

PlayReady allows users to register multiple devices under a ‘domain’ system, but only with the agreement of copyright holders, and it includes the usual restrictions. Content will not play on unregistered devices and providers are free to restrict CD burning, or limit when or how many times a song can be played.

any way it can,” said David Sidebottom, industry specialist at research firm Understanding and Solutions. “Online music represents just five per cent of online sales, and with traditional revenues dropping they need to be more reactive in how they generate an income. Ad-based and subscription services at least offer some sort of revenue stream.”

ISPs braced for battle with music bosses

Internet service providers (ISPs) are expecting a battle over who pays for monitoring file-sharers on their networks and who sorts out the resulting legal problems. As we reported in last month’s *News*, the government is considering forcing ISPs to block subscribers from the internet if they habitually download copyrighted music, but the ISPs say that expecting them to bear all the costs is impractical.

A recent case involving ISP Tiscali and the record industry’s BPI highlights the problem. Tiscali cancelled the accounts of four broadband subscribers at the behest of the music industry, under an agreement to police its network for file-swappers. However, the ISP has ripped up the arrangement after an argument over who bears the cost of enforcement.

“The BPI led us to believe we had concluded an agreement to implement its preferred process in October last year, which demonstrated joint leadership in this area and also that our industries could work together to tackle this issue,” a Tiscali spokesperson said.

The BPI claimed that unless Tiscali was prepared to foot the bill, progress was impossible. “While there have been discussions between the BPI and Tiscali, we haven’t been able to reach agreement on a long-term solution,” a spokesman said. “Tiscali is trying to force us to pay a substantial levy to enforce its terms and conditions.”

A spokesperson for the ISP Association questioned who would be legally responsible if a consumer sued after being kicked off the internet if the BPI had identified an innocent person.

IN BRIEF

INTERNET EXPLORER 8 LAUNCHED IN PRIVATE BETA

Microsoft has begun private beta testing of Internet Explorer 8, ahead of the first public beta release later this year. A limited number of ‘qualified beta testers’ have been invited to download the new version of Microsoft’s web browser, which promises to be its most standards-compliant to date.

Precisely what the new browser will offer remains a secret, but Microsoft has revealed that it passes Acid 2, the de facto industry test for standards compliance. It also contains a new mechanism for rendering websites that have been written to work properly in Internet Explorer 6, which, by Microsoft’s own admission, is far from standards-compliant.

JUDGE GIVES ‘VISTA CAPABLE’ CASE THE GO-AHEAD

A US judge has granted permission for a class-action suit against Microsoft, following claims that its Vista Capable scheme deliberately misled consumers. The software giant is being sued in a Seattle court by two plaintiffs, who claim that Windows Vista Capable logos added to PCs before the operating system’s launch were misleading. They claim that the label suggested the PC could run any version of Vista, when in fact it was guaranteed to run only Vista Home Basic.

CLEANING SPRAY DEFEATS DISK ENCRYPTION

Hard disk encryption can be broken using a can of cleaning spray. The encryption key for most systems is stored in RAM, and Princeton researchers have developed a new algorithm that can analyse a chip and decipher the key, allowing access to all encrypted data.

Data stored in RAM is present for seconds or minutes after power loss, depending on the brand of chip. The rate at which data is lost can be slowed by cooling the chips. Researchers found that freezing RAM with an inverted cleaning spray can extend this period to 10 minutes – long enough to remove and transplant the chip into another computer. An analytic algorithm can then recover the key.

IN BRIEF

BBC SELLS SHOWS THROUGH ITUNES

BBC Worldwide has struck a deal with iTunes to sell its programmes through the popular online shop in the UK.

Titles will appear on iTunes after seven days on the BBC's iPlayer, and cost the standard price of £1.89 per episode. Discounts will be available on full series. Programming from the BBC archives will also be available, although only 10 series will be available initially, including *Life on Mars* and *Little Britain*. More series will be added in the coming weeks.

VIRGIN TURN IT OFF AND ON AGAIN

Virgin Media has called in Microsoft for an urgent upgrade to its email service after being hit by a mysterious bug.

The bug has caused a huge slowdown on one of Virgin Media's eight email clusters, with one forum poster noting that his email took 11 hours to arrive. The problems have been occurring since the beginning of February and have affected around 10 per cent of former Telewest customers.

Virgin Media said it was trying to track down the problem with Microsoft's help, but has had little success beyond rebooting the cluster.

SAMSUNG DRIVES IN A SOLID STATE

Samsung has begun production of 64GB solid-state drives (SSDs) with its new SATA II interface. The drives are up to 60 per cent faster than the current generation of SSDs, which Apple offers as an option in the MacBook Air.

The SATA II drives can read data at 100MB/s and write it at 80MB/s, making them up to 60 per cent faster than SATA I drives and up to five times faster than conventional hard disk drives (HDDs). They also consume nearly 75 per cent less power than a typical HDD and are considerably lighter.



Online compensation claims are a bad bet

Victims of last year's monumental data loss débâcle at Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs could lose cash as well as their personal details if they seek compensation using paid-for legal advice packs found online, according to an expert in data protection law.

After discs containing the personal data of 25 million people were lost, putting them at risk of identity fraud theft, several online companies started selling packs aimed at helping victims claim compensation. However, lawyers say that most claimants would be throwing their money down the drain if they pay for these services.

"According to reports, thousands of individuals are paying for advice on the matter of compensation when, taking the law into consideration, there is very little prospect of success," said Rosemary Jay, a data protection expert with the law firm Pinsent Masons.

"Compensation cannot be awarded by a court just because an individual is very upset or angry about the loss of personal data, or because an individual thinks he or she may have been damaged by the loss," she said.

Before consumers could sue, they would need to prove a link between lost data and any personal loss. This could be impossible, because the data is often available from so many different sources.

"The Act requires individuals to prove the link between the damage that was caused by the loss of personal data to the particular incident where the loss occurred. If this link is proved, then compensation for the actual damage can be awarded," said Jay. However, this damage has to be measurable and quantifiable.

"There needs to be something specific for a claim to succeed; for example, if there is evidence that links actual identity theft to a specific data loss incident."

Big pictures from small packages

Texas Instruments is ready to go into production with a chip that will enable mobile phone, laptop and PDA manufacturers to put projectors into mobile devices.

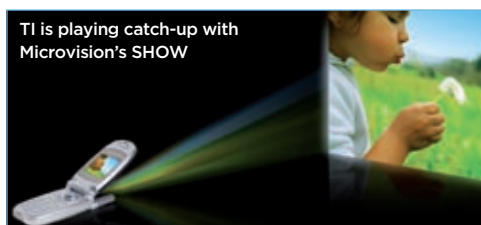
The chips will mean consumer electronics device makers can finally produce gadgets that allow consumers to show off multimedia content such as video and still photos on phones without squinting at

tiny screens. It could also save business users from carrying a separate projector.

"Transforming and improving the way content is experienced from mobile devices has taken a giant step forward," said Frank Moizio of TI's DLP Front Projection. "We expect projection within handset devices to start appearing in 2009." However, battery drain problems caused by power-hungry lasers need to be addressed by handset manufacturers before a launch.

The chip uses the same DLP display technology found in large-screen HD TV and cinema projectors. This uses chips with up to 2.2 million microscopic mirrors that switch rapidly.

The technology enters a rapidly emerging market, with Microvision announcing its SHOW handheld projector (pictured) earlier this year. Samsung is also expected to launch a similar product soon.



TI is playing catch-up with Microvision's SHOW

Real bother for software player

RealPlayer media software has been slammed as "misleading" and "deceptive" by US-based watchdog StopBadware.org. The consumer protection group, set up to counter malicious and underhand software practices, found that both version 10.5 and version 11 of RealPlayer breached its regulations on open disclosure of what the program actually does.

"Software producers have a responsibility to inform users, clearly and unambiguously, about what software will be installed on their computers and what it will do," said Maxim Weinstein, manager of StopBadware.org at Harvard Law School. "RealNetworks does not allow users to make an informed choice about how their computers will be used."

RealPlayer version 10.5 fell foul of the group because experts discovered there was inadequate disclosure of advertising behaviour. According to Stopbadware.org, "the advertising software bundled with RealPlayer is misleadingly called a 'Message Center', and is described as software designed to provide useful software updates. When RealPlayer 10.5 is installed, the advertising features of this 'Message

Center' are enabled by default." The software is often distributed via the BBC's website as a player of choice for the corporation's content.

RealPlayer 11, meanwhile, doesn't disclose that it installs Real's Rhapsody Player Engine and doesn't remove this software when RealPlayer is uninstalled. RealNetworks says it plans to address the concerns in future versions of the software, but has not said when a new release will be available.



▲ Real's tactics are under fire from campaigners



Children at risk from money-grabbing marketing men

Online advertisers are increasingly at odds with web users and mainstream media standards, according to damning reports that suggest a cavalier attitude among web-based marketers.

While there are strict standards in place for when and how adverts are presented on television, rules are more lax online and children's sites are among the worst offenders, leading to calls for a more responsible attitude from advertisers.

In its *Fair Game* report into the advertising practices of the 40 most popular websites among children, the National Consumer Council found that 211 online ads were shown on the opening two pages.

Although many of the sites visited by youngsters were actually targeted at adults and so have a fair excuse, even sites aimed at children were flouting responsible advertising, the researchers said. The report found that 25 per cent of the adverts on children's sites promoted products or services that were prohibited to children under 16 in the UK. These mostly involved gambling and dating.

Equally concerning, say the researchers, were their findings that, because adverts are often incorporated into content and not labelled as commercial, they carry too much weight. "Our concern is that parents are not aware of the pervasive and often covert format and content of some advertising found on sites popular with children," said Dr Agnes Nairn, co-author of the report. "Children are quite savvy, but in many cases cannot distinguish content from commerce so can't really make informed choices."

Nearly a quarter of adverts were integrated into content such as sponsored 'advergaming', rather than taking a clear advertising slot such as a banner advert.

The report has led to calls for greater monitoring by the Advertising Standards Authority, although the watchdog said the situation was improving as new rules on gambling websites have only recently come into effect.

"Now that the new rules for gambling advertising are in place, proactive monitoring of gambling advertisements online is routinely undertaken and only permitted advertisers can advertise in the UK," the regulator said in a statement.

Nonetheless, industry experts still believe that advertisers are treading a fine line and should consider a self-regulated watershed similar to the one that bars alcohol advertising before 9pm on television.

According to Igal Brightman, author of *Deloitte's Technology, Media and Telecommunications Predictions for 2008*, as more adverts appear online (Yahoo! says it is already a £22 billion-a-year industry), companies will be increasingly forced to develop mainstream responsibilities.

"Much of the focus on controlling advertisements so far has been on traditional sectors," said Brightman. "But the more successful online advertising gets, the more subject to regulatory scrutiny it may become."

"While a watershed, a time before which certain content cannot be shown, exists for television and radio, this typically does not apply to the internet."

"The online advertising industry should self-regulate and implement technology that would enable watersheds and restrict certain types of advertising, such as for alcoholic drinks."

NEWS ANALYSIS

Video nasties send surfers over the edge

Online advertising is a fact of life. It's the bread and butter to the internet's sandwich and holds the content together. Until we're willing to pay for that content (and if publishers thought we were, we'd already be coughing up cash), then ads pay our way.

But there are limits to how far we are willing to go and how many pieces of silver-tongued spin we will swallow in order to access the web's gems. According to recent reports, we are beginning to choke.

Recent research from Burst Media says that video adverts on the web are a bridge too far and they turn users off more quickly than even the most annoying pop-ups that preceded them.

More than seven out of 10 users find them intrusive, the marketing company says, and more than half of us (51 per cent) stop watching an online video once we encounter an in-stream advert. And 15.3 per cent of consumers leave a website immediately if they encounter an in-stream video advertisement.

Whether they're in-stream, appearing before a YouTube clip plays or burst on to our screens with full volume accompaniment, video commercials need an advertising ASBO.

For example, while trawling through the *Telegraph* sport section recently, a loud burst of video blared from the laptop's speakers. The violation of personal space was as unwelcome as it was unsolicited, and was as popular as a veal burger at a vegan dinner party with fellow coffee shop inhabitants.

Does the *Telegraph*, for all its push into new technology, really believe readers are going to accept this intrusion? It's made worse by the fact that it's too loud, too grainy and regularly crashes web browsers.

Some video ads have been successful because they are amusing or arty enough to make them worth watching in their own right. In most cases, they are rubbish.

Advertising executives have a habit of creating vulgar ways of attracting our attention. They have ticked people off with pop-ups and roll-overs and they are doing the same again with video. The tide is turning, however, and a new version of an ad blocker is causing consternation and a degree of terror among the online advertising slickers.

Ad Block Plus is an add-on for the Firefox browser and, while it isn't perfect (it won't block every commercial), the free software does shut the door on most unwelcome intrusions. Instead of ugly pages cluttered with flashing banners and sidebars, there's clean white space. It's like driving on an empty road again. Pages load more quickly, too.

Advertising companies don't like this software, and neither do some of the site owners that make money from selling online advertising space.

Some independent publishers and bloggers have started an initiative called 'Why Firefox is Blocked', which blocks Firefox users regardless of whether they have Ad Block Plus installed. It's the heavy-handed action of an industry running scared.

"The software isn't controlled by a corporation with standards and ethics requirements but by no-one in particular," said Ian Shafer on behalf of the advertising company Limelight Networks. "We've got a burgeoning problem."

"Blocking ads en masse is a critical threat to the stability of the unwritten contract between publisher/service provider and the consumer, especially when the content delivered or services rendered aren't premium or paid."

It echoes the reaction of Jamie Kellner, erstwhile CEO of US cable giant Turner Broadcasting. He said: "Any time you skip a commercial, you're actually stealing the programming." Kellner's comment came hot on the heels of the emergence of PVR devices such as the TiVo, which allow people to pre-record programmes and skip through adverts using fast-forward controls.

Do we have any sympathy for the advertisers' concerns? About as much as we have with striking Tube drivers.

Stewart Mitchell
Correspondent



IN BRIEF

ELONEX LAUNCHES £99 LAPTOP

Elonex is going head-to-head with Asus and the One Laptop Per Child foundation by releasing a £99 laptop called the One. The company is pitching the ultraportable machine at the educational sector but also plans to offer it to consumers.

The One has 1GB of flash memory, and a WiFi adaptor is included. A 2GB version with Bluetooth will also be available for £120.

HOTMAIL BLACKED OUT

Microsoft has confirmed that an undisclosed technical problem prevented people from logging into their Hotmail accounts.

"We are aware that some customers may be experiencing difficulty accessing their Windows Live accounts," Microsoft wrote in a statement. "We sincerely apologise for any inconvenience and disruption this may be causing."

The outage affected all services that require a Windows Live account, including Hotmail, the Xbox Live community site and Windows Live Messenger.

The company claims to have resolved the issue, but it has not confirmed the cause of the problem.

THE PC YOU'D HAVE TO BE A REAL MUG TO BUY

A Californian student has designed a concept PC that allows you to pick up your emails with your morning pick-me-up. The Yuno PC is a computer built into a coffee cup. The exterior of the mug doubles as a flexible OLED display that delivers a series of alerts. So, for example, owners can check the status of their email inbox, local traffic reports or the weather forecast in between slurps of their morning brew. Owners can even choose their own images to act as a screensaver.

SEX AUCTION WOMAN WINS PATERNITY ROW

A German woman who took part in an online sex auction has won a court battle to force the website to reveal the names of the winners so she can find out who the father of her child is.

Six men won internet auctions to have sex with the woman in April and May last year, but they were known to her only by their online names.

Putting a face to viruses

Ever wondered what a computer virus really looks like? Romanian computational artist Alex Dragulescu did, combining his creative talents with the computer code of real virus threats to build abstract images that could be straight from a biology lab's microscope.

The gallery of images he has produced are created not by deft handiwork in Paint Shop Pro but by writing computer code that analyses what's happening inside the virus and turning it into a visual representation.

"The image is created using the actual code of the virus; this is not just my impression or based on someone's interpretation," the artist told *Computer Shopper* as he discussed works such as Netsky, Virut and Parite.

In the past he has worked on 'spam plants', computational images that grew organically based on the way junk email blossoms as it moves around the web. Now he has teamed up with researchers at security company MessageLabs to put a face to some of the biggest viral villains on the web.

"The MessageLabs threat guys disassemble the code to render it inoperative and send it to me," said Dragulescu. "For each piece of disassembled code, API calls, memory addresses and subroutines are tracked and analysed."

"Their frequency, density and grouping are mapped to the inputs of an algorithm that grows a virtual 3D

entity," he said. "So the patterns and rhythms found in the data drive the configuration of the artificial organism: how they're grouped, how many tentacles they have, how curly they get and what colours they are."

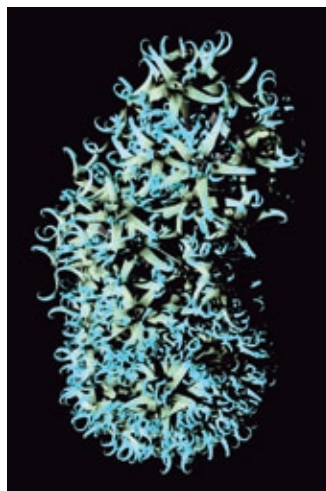
The images are the culmination of over a decade of work combining mathematics with modernism and applying programming skills to the artist's palette.

"I've been developing computational art for years and have done numerous projects in this area," said Dragulescu. "All my projects are experiments and explorations of algorithms, computational models,

simulations and information visualisations that involve data derived from databases, spam emails, blogs and video game assets. I loved the idea of putting a realistic face to something that's intangible, like the threats that are now recognised names."

According to MessageLabs, which commissioned the work, there could be some real practical uses to the images in the battle against virus-writers.

"This is something that has an analytical aspect," said Paul Wood, a senior analyst at the company. "Because Alex has taken real code of spam and viruses, the patterns help to draw similarities in the family of spam or the same family of virus."



▲ The Storm worm was much uglier than this for those it infected

CRAZE

What the web is really for with Stewart Mitchell

Getting your cables in a twist

Forget the 2012 Olympics. The real money is in the latest hit sport of Speedcabling, where competitors battle opponents in a do-or-die duel to discover who is the fastest at untangling a matted mess of Cat5 Ethernet cabling.

In a serious sport every bit as technically challenging as Taekwondo, opponents have to stick to strict laws. According to the official rules, there are two types of competition. In 2-2-2 competition, the contestant has to untangle two seven-foot cables, two 15-foot cables, and two 25-foot cables. In the 4-4-4 competition, there are four of each type of cable. All cables must be held above the head when untangled and remain functional throughout.

The sport's inventor and world governing body Steven Schkolne goes to great lengths to ensure a level playing field for all competitors. "The process of bundling the cables must be applied uniformly and methodically, to ensure the integrity of our sport," he said.

To this end the cables are tossed into a tumble-dryer on a high heat setting for exactly three minutes. "During official competition, bundling may only be performed by certified bundlers," Schkolne assures competitors.

Contestants are allowed to use any Cat5 Ethernet cable they wish, as long as it is capable of

transferring data at 100Mbit/s prior to competition. During competition the colours red, blue and yellow are used for the seven, 15 and 25-foot cables respectively.

The inaugural event, in a glitzy, fan-packed arena in downtown Los Angeles, was won by web developer and former pizza chef Matthew Howell, who swooped the first prize of a \$50 voucher for a local restaurant.

Promoters told *Computer Shopper* that Schkolne hopes to expand the sport to a global audience. With interest piqued on both sides of the Atlantic, there's a real possibility of a Ryder Cup-style Euro-American showdown.



What a tangled web



First looks

Every month we bring you sneak previews of the latest kit from www.computershopper.co.uk

New iPhone firmware

Apple has released a free firmware upgrade for the iPhone. This latest version, 1.1.3, adds several new features to Apple's smartphone. Some of these require an effort on your part to get the most from them, though.

The iPhone lacks a GPS receiver for accurately pinpointing and tracking your location. The new update includes a version of Google Maps that attempts to determine your position by triangulating your mobile phone signal with any nearby masts or even wireless routers. If successful, your location is marked on the map with blue crosshairs.

Accuracy varies considerably. When we tested it in London's West End, it pinpointed our location to the nearest street corner. It was less impressive in the suburbs of the capital, where it was able to narrow down our location only to within a 1½-mile radius. Usefully, you can bookmark locations on the map and use them as a starting point for directions.

iTunes has long had the ability to store a song's lyrics, and these can now be viewed on the iPhone by simply tapping the screen as the song is playing. iTunes can't fetch lyrics from a central database like it can with CD track names, so you still have to scour the web and copy and paste lyrics in.

Another improvement is that you can now switch between alternate language and commentary tracks when watching videos, and navigate them using a DVD-style chapter menu. Some of the movies and TV shows in Apple's iTunes Store have these extras included, but there's no simple way to add chapters to your existing videos.

The iPhone synchronises its music and video library with only one computer by default. You can now manually manage your media library so you can add songs and videos from any computer with iTunes; a feature iPods have had for some time. You still can't



use the iPhone as a flash drive, though, which is a shame given its 8GB of storage.

Bear in mind that any third-party changes will be disabled by the update. The new firmware can be downloaded through iTunes.

AlertMe intelligent home security

The new alertMe system uses the internet and text messages to keep you abreast of happenings in your home. The kit includes a hub, sensors, key fobs and other useful gadgets.

The hub connects to your broadband router, from where it can update your personal page on the alertMe website with up-to-date information from your home. This data is gleaned from wireless sensors that you place around your home, which communicate with the hub using the ZigBee wireless standard – a simpler and cheaper alternative to Bluetooth.

The supplied sensors include the usual motion detectors and door or window sensors. There's also an alarm detector that listens out for your smoke alarm or freezer alarm and forwards this on to the hub. Key fobs

are included to deactivate the system, and these also keep a log of who's at home. Finally, there's a large button, which can be used as a panic button or simply to reset the alarm.

Rather than rely on a big alarm box outside your house, the activated system sends text message alerts to designated numbers. You can set these up on the website and so leave your neighbours in charge when you go on holiday.

The hub includes a GPRS connection, so will continue to run on battery power should your phone line or broadband fail.

It costs £399 inc VAT for the hub and a selection of sensors, plus a service charge of £12 a month. The concept is great, and we're eager to get our hands on the kit when it launches in the near future.



Razer Mako 2.1 speakers

THX, best known for its work on cinema sound systems and acoustics, hopes to bring a new dimension to desktop sound with its co-development of Razer's Mako 2.1 speaker system.

Traditional speaker designs direct their sound horizontally into the room, but the Mako speakers are directed downwards. Sound is bounced off the surface they're standing on to create a 360° sound field. This creates a larger ideal listening area without the need for precise speaker positioning.

Although these are 2.1 speakers, it was hard to spot exactly where the sound was coming from. Music

sounded great. Volume is controlled using a touch-sensitive wired remote, with separate modes to control the overall sound and the throbbing bass that emerges from the subwoofer.

Razer makes high-end gaming peripherals, and at first listen these powerful speakers sound as though they'd make a great addition to any PC. However, one drawback is the high price; they are expected to cost £250 inc VAT when released in the UK next month. US imports are already available online, but at an even pricier £320 inc VAT.

